United Nations E/CN.6/2012/NGO/59

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
5 December 2011

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-sixth session
27 February-9 March 2012
Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by World Young Women's Christian Association, Young Women's Christian Association of Nigeria and YWCA of Canada, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

11-62131 (E) 201211

Please recycle

Statement

The World Young Women's Christian Association (World YWCA) movement represents the voices of the 25 million women, young women and girls who are Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) members and service users in 108 countries worldwide, many living in rural communities. We recognize the role played by rural women in poverty eradication, development and climate justice, and are strongly committed to the empowerment of rural women, which is critical to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and lies at the heart of community-based organizations such as the YWCA.

Access to education for girls in rural areas lags behind that for boys. Without adequate education, women remain behind men in employment, income, promotions and pensions, perpetuating gender inequality throughout the life cycle. Without education, women are less likely to be aware of their rights and their self-worth and are more vulnerable to rights violations. We call upon the Commission on the Status of Women to promote increased investment in education for girls, more qualified teachers in rural communities and measures to ensure that girls stay in school so as to reach their full potential.

For every year a girl remains in school, she avoids early marriage, which affects millions of girls worldwide. It is estimated that every day, more than 25,000 girls under the age of 18 are married. Girls from rural communities face increased vulnerability, particularly as legislation against child marriage is difficult to enforce in these areas, legal rights awareness is low and traditional practices prevail. Child marriage is a human rights violation that impedes development and directly prevents the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights are critical issues for women and young women living in rural areas. In the absence of adequate infrastructure, education, trained professionals, facilities, medication and transportation, thousands of women die each year due to violations of their sexual and reproductive rights. In line with the Millennium Development Goals, the Commission must prioritize increased investment in basic health services in rural communities to prevent these violations. Health education, including comprehensive information about sexual and reproductive health and HIV, is an essential component of the empowerment of rural women and is necessary for the prevention of HIV infection. High levels of stigma in rural communities result in the denial of the sexual and reproductive rights of women living with HIV. YWCAs also express concern over the effects of nuclear radiation in rural areas on women and girls' sexual and reproductive rights, including gene damage, cancer and birth defects.

Violence against women comes in many forms and is represented in both the public and private spheres. Rural women and girls face increased vulnerability to violence due to isolation and a lack of support services, employment and access to education. Violence against rural indigenous women is of particular concern. This group not only lacks access to economic and social resources, but their security is at increased risk owing to isolation and the lack of police presence, including in developed countries. It is important for the Commission to respond to violence as it affects the lives of women in rural communities by ensuring legislation is in place to prevent violence against women in all its forms, as well as by promoting increased awareness and community engagement in ending violence in rural communities.

Women in rural communities often experience conflict in a more traumatic manner than men. In jungle areas or remote villages, there is little protection for women during the outbreak of conflict. Internal displacement also exposes women and girls to greater vulnerability to sexual abuse, harassment and violence in refugee camps where there are inadequate protections and poor living conditions. War results in many women being widowed, and households headed by women in remote areas are also more vulnerable to exploitation and sexual abuse.

Rural women can play a vital role in the prevention of conflict as community leaders trained to build peace in vulnerable situations, ease ethnic tensions and avoid the outbreak of conflict. Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) is an essential tool for the international community to ensure women are included in peace processes; however, local implementation is needed. The Commission needs to propose mechanisms to meet the requirements of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) and ensure the financial and technical resources needed to guarantee that the needs of women are addressed in peace negotiations and that their leadership is integral to these processes.

World YWCA emphasizes the importance of volunteer-based organizations in rural areas, which have vast knowledge of local needs and are based in the community. Volunteer organizations fill the void left by inadequate government funding and infrastructure in rural areas, providing local women with essential services from education to access to basic health care. Especially in rural areas, where facilities are insufficient to meet the needs of isolated women, volunteer services are essential to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and should be recognized.

Every day, rural women and girls face issues that occur as a result of institutionalized discrimination and lack of empowerment. Through targeted and sustained investment, many issues facing rural women could be tackled. The Millennium Development Goals cannot be achieved without the input and participation of rural women who are vital to development issues such as food security, climate justice, peacebuilding and the economic security of families and communities.

The possibility of rural women claiming their rights and leading community change is inextricably linked to financing for gender equality and the empowerment of women. Recognizing that rural women are faced with many challenges to their rights and well-being, and that women are at the heart of the sustainable development process, YWCAs call on the Commission on the Status of Women to recognize the vital role of leadership and political participation by women and young women in the eradication of poverty in rural communities and encourage investment in policies, programmes and organizations that develop value and make visible women's, particularly young women's, leadership in rural communities. In particular, we encourage initiatives that promote women's leadership in peacebuilding, conflict prevention and environmental protection in rural communities. Specific recommendations include:

1. Increase funding and access to education and training for women and girls in rural areas in order to decrease the disproportionate levels of illiteracy and economic insecurity, and follow through on the commitments of the Beijing Platform for Action.

2. Develop and fund policies and programmes to support access for rural women and young women to obtain decent work, diversified employment options and economic participation as a means of decreasing women's poverty and supporting women-led development in rural communities. This includes access to drought assistance, agricultural resources and income, land ownership, land inheritance rights and environmental education.

3. Ensure that responses to the global economic downturn address the disproportionate impact on women and girls in rural areas, particularly in the context of access to health, employment, education and community services.

4. Prioritize increased investment in health spending for women, young women and girls in rural areas to ensure realization of the right to health, especially sexual and reproductive health and rights. Responding to the prevalence of HIV among rural women with free, voluntary testing and support services and access to treatment is essential, as is preventing thousands of unnecessary deaths each year due to the absence of maternity health care in rural areas.

5. Scale up investment to tackle violence against women, young women and girls in rural areas, which infringes on empowerment and undermines human rights. We call for the resourcing of programmes, including violence prevention, rights education and legal aid, that are responsive to the vulnerabilities of rural women. Safe houses are also required in rural communities for women, young women and girls escaping violence.

6. Promote legislation and law enforcement to criminalize child marriage, invest in programmes that engage with cultural norms that allow the continuation of harmful practices against girls in rural areas and ensure that disaggregated data on births in rural and urban areas is collected.

7. Ensure that royalties and economic benefits that flow from mining and extractive industries in rural communities are equally distributed between women and men, including equal employment in these sectors. Recognize that mining and extractive industries can have harmful impacts on women's access to housing, food security, community services, the environment and infrastructure in rural areas, and develop mitigation strategies.

8. Harness the potential of emerging technologies to reduce social isolation among women in rural areas and improve access to health services, training and education opportunities, invest in the skills and leadership of rural young women and embrace the application of new technologies as a mechanism for empowerment and poverty reduction.

United Nations E/CN.6/2012/NGO/60

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
5 December 2011

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-sixth session
27 February-9 March 2012
Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by World Youth Alliance, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

11-62144 (E) 100112

Please recycle

Statement

Intrinsic dignity of the human person and the Millennium Development Goals

The recognition that all human beings have intrinsic dignity is the only foundation for human rights. It is the intrinsic worth of the human person that provides the basis on which to found policies and laws that create conditions under which human beings can flourish. Without such a foundation, human rights are articulated and enforced based upon the subjective preferences of those in power, thus undermining the entire human rights project and leading to violations of human rights.

The World Youth Alliance recognizes the necessity of empowering rural women in order to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. We believe that recognizing the interdependent relationship between the development goals leads to their achievement. Every violation of human rights is an obstacle to the full achievement of the Millennium Development Goals by 2015. In particular, rural women's lack of access to health care, shelter, education, participation and protection still hampers progress towards the Millennium Development Goals.

As mothers, providers of food and caretakers of children, the elderly and the sick, rural women are at the centre of social and economic life in their communities. The empowerment of rural women brings about reduced family poverty, increased health and reduced child mortality. The opposite is true when the State does not invest in their health and education.

The World Youth Alliance will analyse and propose improvements for the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in the light of the dignity of the human person. Specifically, we will address the importance of improving access to maternal and reproductive health and education in empowering rural women.

Maternal and reproductive health at the heart of empowerment

Maternal and reproductive health occupy a special place in our efforts to achieve the empowerment of rural women because the health of women — in particular, mothers who have formed families — is critical to achieving development at the most local levels. The family is the fundamental unit of society, responsible for the protection of new life and the formation of the next generation in solidarity. Rural women exist at the heart of family life; their death during childbirth threatens the entire development project of their family, village and society. The health of children depends on the health of the mother. Healthy children are the drivers of development and prosperity.

Rural areas in most regions of the world are furthest from achieving the Millennium Development Goals, according to the *Millennium Development Goals Report 2010*. Currently, Goal 5, on maternal health, is the least achieved Millennium Development Goal. The provision of basic maternal health care ensures the lives of rural women and mothers and must be the focus in attaining the goals outlined in Goal 5. Statistics show that maternal morbidity is highest in the rural areas of developing countries. Only one third of rural women receive the recommended prenatal care and only two thirds receive prenatal care at least once. Furthermore, there are disparities between urban and rural women: urban women are twice as likely to receive professional care at childbirth as rural women are. In particular,

sub-Saharan Africa, Southern Asia and Oceania have the lowest rates of births attended by skilled personnel and the highest rates of maternal mortality.

Therefore, for the development of rural communities, rural women must have access to maternal health care, including prenatal and post-natal health care and emergency obstetric care. The most important step in improving rural women's reproductive health is increasing the number of skilled birth attendants, who are trained in treating obstetric fistula, haemorrhaging, high blood pressure and infection, the primary causes of maternal mortality. The United Nations Population Fund states that three fourths of all maternal deaths could be averted by the presence of skilled birth attendants. Furthermore, better infrastructure, more hospitals and cleaner health-care facilities will reduce maternal mortality.

Adolescent birth rates in rural areas are almost double those of urban areas. Early and forced marriages and early sexual debut contribute to these rates. Early pregnancy and childbearing are often impediments to improvements in the educational, economic and social status of women in all parts of the world, particularly in rural areas. Early pregnancy and early motherhood can entail complications during pregnancy and childbirth. In developed and developing countries, the trend towards early sexual experience undermines efforts to fight HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

The World Youth Alliance stresses that, given such problems, educating rural women about their reproductive health is essential. Reproductive health education that is life-affirming, person-centred and evidence-based equips rural women with the tools to know their bodies and to plan for childbearing without reliance on drugs or other medical interventions. This better enables rural women and rural couples to realize their right to determine the number and spacing of their children.

The issue of reproductive health must not be addressed solely within the framework of the provision of family planning services. The desire of rural women to found a family must be considered by States in their development of women's health policies. Statistics reflecting low contraceptive use in rural areas do not necessarily reflect a lack of access to contraception; many rural women do not want to use contraception for religious, cultural or health reasons. Comprehensive reproductive health programming is critical in empowering rural women to act on their desires to found a family.

Rural communities face unique challenges. Community members best understand what is necessary for the rural community to thrive. As such, the rural community must be the locus of decision-making and problem-solving. The political community at the national and international levels must respect the ability of the rural community to understand and confront the issues it faces. At the heart of the rural community is the family, the most fundamental unit of society, and healthy families lead to a healthy rural community. Therefore, the political community at all levels must protect and nurture the family in order to ensure the well-being of all rural people.

The world's greatest resource is the human person. Investment in the human person at the local level ensures the protection of this resource. For rural communities, investment in women in particular is critical because of women's roles as mother, provider and caretaker. Rural women drive solutions within their own local communities because they both understand the problems of their communities

and know the appropriate ways to confront and solve them. Investment in rural women requires investing in maternal and reproductive health care and education, because healthy and educated women contribute economically and raise healthy families. They transform their communities and ensure human flourishing for all those around them.

In conclusion, the international community faces the reality that Millennium Development Goal 5 is the farthest from being achieved and that maternal mortality in rural areas remains very high. Progress in the area of maternal health can be achieved only if maternal health policies consider the desire of the rural woman to found a family, and States parties must recognize the irreplaceable social contribution that rural women make in bearing and raising children and in forming them as citizens to participate in the development of each particular society. States that do not recognize this critical contribution — and do not provide the necessary basis for providing maternal health care — cannot develop, since they ignore the fundamental basis of social progress. Without healthy mothers, children and families in rural communities, social development cannot occur. Only a system that respects the intrinsic dignity of the human person will recognize and respect the needs of rural women and invest in the future of society.